

GOOD STORIES FOR CHILDREN

By Walt McDougall

HOW MAGGIE WANTED TO BE A WITCH, BUT WAS SAVED BY A PRINCE

Tired of Study the Little Girl Became the Pupil of a Hideous Witch

THERE were two little girls who lived in the same street, but who were very different in character; and, although they played together daily, they never really agreed upon anything. Maggie Fortesque was the name of one, and Nora Hicks of the other, and they were both of the same age.

Maggie never wished to study, but would play or sit idly at the window looking out at the passers-by, while Nora diligently studied or practiced her piano lesson. Nora had an admirable temper, but Maggie's was very uncertain, for she was often cross and snappish without reason, and she found fault with everything about her, so that often Nora felt that it would be nicer to play alone. In fact, sometimes she did take her doll and seek a spot where Maggie could not find her at all when she found that Maggie's temper was likely to upset her own.

One day they were talking about their studies, and Maggie declared that she wished such things had never been invented, for they only tortured and perplexed children, and she, for one, couldn't see the use of learning all about strange lands which one would never have money enough to visit, or all about the stars, which, after all, you never could see any better unless you had a thousand-dollar telescope, or any of the things she had to learn with so much trouble.

"I do not wonder," said patient Nora, after she had listened for some time, "that they call you 'Cranky Maggie,' for you are surely the most unreasonable girl. Some day you will be punished for your neglect and carelessness. I'd not wish to be in your shoes when it happens."

"I don't care!" cried Maggie, pouting angrily. "I wish I were a witch! If I knew some way to learn how to be one I'd go right at it."

"It would be too much trouble for you to even learn that," replied Nora.

Neither of them observed a bent and wrinkled old woman who stood near, and whose face turned toward them when Maggie declared that she wished to be a witch. The old woman followed them until they separated, and then she came to Maggie's side and said:

"So, my little Maggie, you want to be a witch?" Maggie was very much alarmed to think that this old woman could read her thoughts, for she was not aware that she had overheard her, and she shrank away from the old hag.

Learning to be a Witch

"Do not be afraid," said the woman, with an awful smile that made her face look like a snapping turtle's. "I'll never harm you, but if you wish to be a witch I'll soon teach you how to go about it, and you'll be a lovely one and have all the fun in the world."

"I—I don't think I want to now," said Maggie. She had already arrived at the conclusion that this was a witch, and she was right, for it was old Gladys, the witch of Rutabaga, who lived in a broken-down hovel in the woods, and only came to town to pick out some new victims for her sorceries.

"I don't think it's much fun, anyway," added Maggie, "for nobody seems to like witches."

"Well, nobody likes you very much, either," replied old Gladys; "and so you'd be no worse off even if there were no advantages in being a witch."

"What are the advantages?" asked Maggie. "Well, there are so many I can hardly begin to tell them. It's the wonderful power that a witch has that makes her happy all the time."

The witch wanted her to accompany her at once, but Maggie desired to see her mother once more and say farewell to Nora, and this was what in the end saved her, for had she gone away at once no one would ever have known what had become of her.

When she told Nora of her intention the little girl begged her to abandon such an awful venture, but Maggie had now firmly resolved to be an out-and-out witch and nothing could stop her. In fact, as she thought of all the mean things she could do she now was anxious to begin her witchcraft as soon as possible. She hurried to the woods when she had parted from Nora, and there she found the old witch Gladys waiting. They went at once to the hut, and when they had entered it the witch called: "Come Cat! Come Cat!" Whereupon a mangy and feeble old tabby crept slowly to her side and spit at Maggie like a demon.

"Now," said the witch, "you must begin your studies by stroking old Lucifer's back and strike out sparks to warm me after my long, cold walk."

Although frightened, Maggie stroked the cat's mangy back, but it was difficult to strike out many sparks, as her fur was almost worn off, and you can't get sparks from a bald cat. After a time the witch cried: "I've off! I am warm now." Then she said: "Get the broom behind the door."

Maggie brought the broom, and Gladys said: "Now straddle it!"

Maggie got astride of the broom, and when the witch clicked suddenly with her lips the broom rose from the floor with Maggie and began to whirl around the room like a mad thing. Maggie, although much afraid, managed to hold on until the witch cried: "Whoa, Asbestos!" when the broom sank to the floor again.

"You ride splendidly!" cried Gladys, "and I am sure you'll make a witch in time. Now, you shall ride to-night across the world even to Mesopotamia, where you must visit Circe, the ancient enchantress, my beloved mistress, and she will tell you what to do next."

The witch wrapped Maggie in a seedy black shawl and put a pointed hat on her head, and dressed herself likewise, after which she brought out another old broom.

"Now we are ready. I'll go with you as far as the river, but that's all."

Then they mounted their brooms and rose into the air. It was very dark, but Maggie, after she had grown used to the sensation, could see that they were shooting along with the speed of birds far above the steeples of towns or the tallest pine trees of the woods. Thus they rode for hours, until at last they came down at the shore of a very wide river. Here they dismounted on the sand, and Gladys, placing her hands to her mouth, made a queer noise several times. Soon Maggie heard a faint response from far out on the water. She told the witch, who was quite deaf, that some one had answered.



THE OLD WITCH PAYS MAGGIE'S FARE

"That's old Charon, the ferryman," she said. "He will take you over in his boat, for, as perhaps you know, a witch can't fly across water, and that's why we have stopped here. Do you see him yet?"

"Yes," replied Maggie. "I see a tall man in a boat that is coming toward shore."

"That's Charon, for no one else rows on this river. Everybody else has a naphtha launch."

Soon the boat came to shore and she saw a tall and very aged man standing in the stern, who propelled the ancient-looking craft by means of a long, square-bladed oar. His beard, as white as the seafoam, reached far below his knees, but he was as bald as an eggplant. His face, or at least that part not covered by the white whiskers, was tanned to a nut-brown and his eyes were sunken deep under his bushy eyebrows, while a stern and sombre frown gave him a terrible aspect. He bowed very politely to Gladys and said:

"Ha! Another pupil for my sister Circe. It's a long time since you sent one, my dear Gladys. Do you accompany her to Mesopotamia?"

"No, indeed," answered the witch, chuckling. "I'm far too old to be gadding about the world now. I prefer to sit by the fire and listen to old Lucifer's snores. You seem to stand the wear and tear of years better, Mr. Charon."

The boatman smiled but said nothing, and then Maggie was placed in the boat, after which Gladys handed in the broom, telling her to hold on to it, and in a few moments she found herself out under the stars on the dark, wide river alone with the scumby man. He never spoke a word, and Maggie wondered whether he objected to witches. When the farther shore was reached she sprang out in a hurry upon the silvery sand, and then he spoke, smiling maliciously.

"You needn't be in such a hurry to get away, for your fare was paid."

Maggie did not reply, but sprang upon her broom, and away it flew like lightning, very likely instructed by the witch as to the proper course to follow, for Maggie found that she could not direct it at all. On they whizzed, sometimes passing a startled flock of geese slanting along the sky, then just missing a falling star shooting dizzily earthward. It was an exciting and perhaps a dangerous ride, but the novelty of it prevented Maggie from being very much alarmed. She passed over many lands, for in order to avoid crossing water it was necessary to make very wide detours, and yet so fast was the speed of the wonderful broom she reached Mesopotamia before daylight, and when the sun was just rising over the blue hills of El Phazmagam, the ancient City of Enchanters, the broom suddenly shot down like a bird, alighting and dropping her off her hard wooden seat just in front of a door in a tumbledown palace of yellow brick. She tried to keep from falling by seizing the broom, but it swiftly eluded her and then, to her amazement and regret, it flew away like a swallow and disappeared over the housetops.

In the House of Circe

Maggie was about to cry, when the door of the brick palace opened and she saw a woman standing there. If old Gladys was wrinkled and bent, what shall I say about this one who now appeared? She was so old that she could scarcely hobble along, and her toothless lower jaw only missed rubbing against her nose by the eighth of an inch as she mumbled to Maggie an invitation to enter the house. However, Maggie had grown used to horrible old women by this time and she was not afraid. She got up at once and followed this one into the clammy interior of the palace, which was dark and mouldy beyond words to describe. Bats flew along the ceiling among spiders' webs centuries old, owls hooted in the corners and snakes, of which Maggie was very much afraid, glided from side to side noiselessly as spirits; while snails, toads and all sorts of repulsive, creepy things seemed to be under foot at every turn.

Pale, sickly toadstools grew all about, a green moss crept up the walls, and a sort of mist shrouded the distant parts of the hall, so that all seemed unreal and dreamy except the old hag herself. The witch Circe, who in very ancient times was the queen of all enchantresses, but who has now sunk to the level of any of them in public esteem, gazed over the pretty child who had fallen into her hands for several minutes before she uttered a word. Then she said:

"My pretty darling, you'll make a lovely witch! We need such as you nowadays, indeed! But you cannot begin to bewitch men at once, as perhaps my dear sister Gladys has already told you. You will have to enter upon a little period of probation, as it were, in order to settle your mind upon the great and delightful task before you, so that you will be prepared to act with discrimination when the time comes."

After walking for some distance she came to a door, which she opened, and told Maggie to enter. Maggie obeyed and found herself in a sort of cavern, for the palace was built against a steep wall of rock, and this was but one of many caves in the natural rock, in several of which old-time witches had dwelt long before the palace had been built.

This cave room was even dirtier, more slimy and noisome than the rooms of the palace itself, and it surpassed any of them in its supply of spiders, toads, worms, bats and owls, without which any of these hags would feel very desolate and forlorn. No one can tell us why a witch must associate with such uncleanly, squirming, crawling things, but so it has always been, and, I suppose, always will be.

A Black Cat for Company

Maggie sat down on a three-legged stool and looked about her at all of these things and shuddered. An ancient brazen lamp was fastened to the wall all covered with cobwebs, for it had not been lighted for centuries, I suppose, and now Circe after some trouble, managed to light it. The dim and feeble rays from the lamp only seemed to make the cave more hideous to Maggie's eyes, and she began right then to be sorry that she had ever wanted to be a witch. She tried to hid this feeling from the witch, for she felt that if it were discovered she might find it very unpleasant, but she determined to run away from the palace at the very first opportunity. Old Circe said that she would bring her some snails and boiled burdock leaves for supper as soon as they were ready, and Maggie shuddered again, for even Gladys hadn't offered her any such food as that. Then Circe departed, leaving the child to her own thoughts and the horrid companions of the cave.

Her thoughts, as you may imagine, were far from being pleasant ones, and every time a green lizard or a spotted toad crept toward her she shrank back against the slimy wall, and then drew away again from the crawling black spiders that hurried hither and thither in great excitement at the sight of a light. Maggie placed her stool in the centre of the cavern and drew up her short skirts about her knees as she saw a large rat peer into the doorway, which Circe had left open. In trembling dread, which increased every moment, she sat for more than an hour watching the door, and the sputtering lamp and wondering when she could be allowed to go to bed. Then Circe returned, bringing a nasty, forbidding looking mess, which she said was Maggie's supper, and a bundle of dirty straw, which she informed her was to be her bed there among the rats and toads, which she called her "darling pets and sweet little treasures."

Maggie was too astonished and troubled to even protest by a word, for she felt an awful fear of this dreadful old hag, far more than she had ever felt even of her teacher at school. Circe sat the bowl of food down upon the floor and tossed the straw into a corner, saying:

"There, my dear, is a nice supper, cooked by my own hands, and I hope you have good appetite. It isn't every little girl begins so fortunately, for we used to starve new pupils for several days; but now we believe in giving them all they need to eat. After you have eaten your supper, make your bed up wherever you please and go to sleep, for to-morrow you must begin to learn some of the simpler lessons. Perhaps by that time I will have found you a nice black cat to keep you company, and who will even be a nicer pet than these other sweet little darlings around you. You may keep the light as long as it burns, but I do not think it will last more than an hour longer."

"After to-night you will have no lamp, but the cat's eyes will be a splendid substitute. There's nothing more delightful than the great green eyes of a cat glaring at you in the darkness, as I have found many and many a time."

With these words the witch left Maggie staring at the steaming dish on the floor and went away. The poor girl, of course, could not even make an effort

to eat the snails and burdock leaves, nor did she dare to lie down in the straw which Circe had brought her. So she sat there watching the flickering lamp-light, dreading every moment to see it expire, and finally, before the light burned out, she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, leaning against the wall in spite of her fears. When she awoke the cave was lighted by a dim twilight that came through the door and Circe was standing by her. The witch cried:

"Why, you never ate your nice supper nor slept in your pretty bed that I brought you!"

"No," answered Maggie; "I sat here thinking and must have fallen asleep."

"Well, you must eat your snails for breakfast, then," said Circe, "for I will not have any waste here, for, as you must have heard, willful waste makes woeful want."

"I am not hungry," replied Maggie, as she looked at the dish of snails on the floor and sickened.

"Then you may keep it for your dinner," said Circe. "I am now going to take the trouble to find you a black cat, so amuse yourself getting acquainted with your companions, the toads and things here, until I return."

Then she went away, and after waiting for awhile Maggie went out into the passage and looked about her, for she was determined to escape at once, but when she had gone the length of the hallway she saw a sight that chilled her blood and showed her at once how impossible it would be for her to get away from the witch, now that she was in her power.

There, by the front door, sat a monstrous dragon, fast asleep, and from his scarlet-rimmed nostrils issued two faint spirals of smoke, showing that he was one of those fire-breathing dragons about which you may have read in your fairy-tale books. He was not chained to the wall, but was perfectly free to attack and devour her if he wished and she shrank back in terror as she saw him move in his sleep. He was so large that his body reached far down the hall and his tail vanished in the gloom of another room, where he had to keep it stored and out of the way.

His enormous paws, with claws a foot long and sharp as fangs, were folded across his breast and the smile on his face showed that he was having a sweet dream of eating little tender babies, I suppose. There was no hope of passing him and in despair she returned to her own room and sat down among the toads and spiders, completely discouraged and convinced that she must be a witch after all. Soon Circe returned with a cat as old, feeble and mangy as Lucifer himself, but very much crosser and spiteful; so fierce, in fact, that he terrified Maggie even more than the big rat. The latter, however, never again appeared after the cat came and in a few days the latter seemed to take to the girl and, after all, he became a very comforting companion in the dark cavern in which she was imprisoned. Many days passed and Maggie, after starving a long time, finally was compelled to eat the awful food that Circe furnished (although she never really could say she was fond of it) and the witch taught her all of her secrets. She never saw the light of day and soon she learned how to see in the dark, so that she did not miss the light. The dragon never left his post at the door, so that she soon gave up all hope of ever escaping from her prison, and there she would be still, I suppose, had not little Nora come to her rescue at last.

Nora Takes a Trip

Nora had an uncle in India and he was very rich, but he had no little girl of his own, so that when he heard that Nora had left school at the head of her class he invited her to visit him and sent an airship to take her to India. Nora was delighted at the chance to see the world, for that's what happens when you go to India on an airship, but principally she was pleased at the thought that now she could seek for poor Maggie and rescue her, for she had been told by old Gladys that her friend had gone to Mesopotamia, which land is not far—on the map, at least—from India.

She made all her preparations in a great hurry, for she was anxious to start on her search, and when the airship arrived she was all ready. The airship was fitted up with a lovely cabin, all her own, with a piano, books, pictures, maps and everything that would help to make the long voyage pleasant, and she screamed with delight when she went aboard and saw how beautiful everything was. Then

She Found the New Life
So Horrible She Was
Glad to be Rescued

she bade farewell to her friends and her mamma and went aboard. Up shot the airship and in ten minutes she lost sight of her home.

The voyage was pleasant and full of delightful incidents, which I have not space to relate to you. Nora arrived in India and met her dear old uncle about a week later, and then she told him her desire to seek for Maggie. He did not know where the old witch Circe was to be found, but he allowed Nora to take the airship and travel all over the land seeking out-of-the-way places for her friend.

One day, when she had alighted near a wood to gather some strange flowers, a handsome young man came by with a camera, who fell in love with her at once. This was the Prince whose father ruled the whole land. He asked Nora all manner of questions and she invited him to take a ride in her airship, but when they went to find the airship it had departed. Something had happened to its machinery and it had run away, and for several days the men on board couldn't fix things so that they could return for their little mistress. So she had to go with the Prince to his father's palace, where she soon fell in love with him, as was to be expected. He told her that the flowers she had gathered were witch hazel blossoms, a plant that is so feared by witches that they will do anything rather than touch it. Then she told him about poor Maggie. He knew where old Circe lived and in the morning they went to the palace, where he knocked at the door, which was opened by the witch herself. The Prince said:

"I've come to take your photograph, the very first photograph that has ever been taken of a witch."

"Go away!" she cried; "I don't want any of your old photographs!" and she about to close the door, when he pushed a bunch of witch hazel flowers at her. She recoiled in fear and horror and yelled for help.

Then the dragon rushed out, but he was as much afraid as she of the magic blossoms and he ran in again in short order, while the cat squallied with a dreadful din.

"Come inside," said the witch, in trembling accents, "for I don't want the neighbors disturbed." Nora and the Prince went indoors.

"Now take your picture and begone immediately," said Circe. "My nerves are in such a state that I can't stand up more than a minute."

The Prince to the Rescue

"It is so very dark in here that I will have to take a flashlight picture, I am afraid," said the Prince, as he looked around at the mouldy walls. "It's like a real dungeon." Nora meanwhile was peering into the dark hallway beyond in hopes of seeing poor little Maggie and soon she spied, far away in the gloom, something white, but she could not make sure whether it was a pile of rags or a child. She did not dare to leave the Prince's side, for the dreadful dragon was lurking back in the hall and his fiery eyes shone in the dark like two balls of red-hot iron, and smoke from his jaws drifted in thin wreaths along the floor toward the door.

The Prince placed his camera in the middle of the hall and told the witch to be ready, but when he saw the dragon creeping slowly to her side he said that he'd like to take the animal in the picture also, as it would be more striking. Now this handsome young man was learned in all the wonderful magic of India, which is far superior to that of any other land, and he had the strange gift of hypnotism, so that with one glance he could hold a person (or even a lion or tiger) spellbound for any length of time. He intended to exert this power when he saw the witch standing before him, but meanwhile he smiled and chatted so pleasantly that she never suspected his great mastery over her, but she thought he was only a reporter for the Hindoo Weekly Brahmin.

When the dragon had taken his place by the witch and had been told to look as pleasant as he could, the Prince touched off the flashlight. The sudden glare and hiss of the blinding flash frightened the dragon just as he had opened his enormous mouth to smile to look pleasant. He gasped and then gulped down the witch in his blind fright. Circe screamed in terror as she felt herself being sucked into that awful throat and she struggled so that she got jammed crosswise in his gullet and there she stopped, head down, with her feet kicking and beating a wild tattoo on the roof of the dragon's mouth. The dragon writhed and twisted, for he was choking to death, but nobody offered to pull the witch out, as the Prince was busy closing his camera. Nora had darted into the hall to look for Maggie. Soon the animal's struggles ceased and then, after a few feeble twitches, he fell over on his scaly side and died.

Just when the Prince had packed up all of his things Nora returned with her poor friend. She was no longer pretty to look at and her hair was tousled and matted, her clothes soiled and in rags, and, besides, she resembled a skeleton, for she was merely skin and bones.

She had wept her blue eyes into a pale green hue and she needed a bath very much, indeed. Nora cried when she brought her out into the light and, indeed, you would have cried, too, I think, if you had seen her. They took her to the Prince's palace and kept her there for a long while, for now, as you may have guessed, she had no longer the least desire to be a witch. Every night the mangy cat used to come around the palace and yowl like a fiend until the Prince showered it with witch hazel, whereupon it went mad and plunged into the river, where it drowned. I have often thought that cat had herself been a witch, but I don't know.

When the airship returned at last Maggie was much improved, so much so that she could be taken to Nora's uncle's house at Jahmpoorbillah and with her went the Prince to ask him for Nora.

Well, Nora married him, of course, for every girl doesn't get a chance like that very often, and she's very happy. Now she is a queen, but Maggie finally came back home and is teaching school in the very schoolhouse where she once studied so poorly. Sometimes, when her scholars are real naughty, she looks cross-eyed at them and frightens them into good behavior, but she never uses any other witch's knowledge whatever and none of them have ever learned that she was ever a prisoner in the palace of the enchantress Circe, nor will they, unless they happen to read this story and discover that she is the Maggie I have told you about.

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